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SUBJECT: CANDIDATE REGISTRATION REFLECTS PUBLIC OPINION

REF: KABUL 1111

¶1. (U) On May 8 at 5:00 p.m. (local time), the two-week candidate registration period for the August 2009 presidential and provincial council elections will close. As the Independent Election Commission (IEC) compiles the registration data, a strong preliminary trend speaks to poor public opinion of provincial councils (PC). In 2005, 3201 Afghans came forward as candidates for the 420 provincial council seats available nationwide. With one day left in the registration period, only 1725 individuals are standing as candidates for the same number of seats - just 53 percent of the 2005 total. In contrast, the percentage of female candidates has remained steady with a three percent increase since 2005. Currently, 11 percent of all registered candidates (178) are women, and every province has at least one female candidate. The fall in numbers of female candidates is lower than that of male candidates - 38 percent vs. 47 percent.

EVEN GOOD ADVERTISING...

¶2. (U) The electoral law reserves 25 percent of provincial council positions - 124 seats - for women. Based on a perception of low female turnout at the beginning of candidate registration, the IEC, Afghan civil society and the international community worked to encourage potential female candidates. The IEC formed outreach teams who engaged with political parties, civil society, female MPs and Afghan government institutions such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of the Hajj and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. The IEC called on this diverse group of organizations to activate traditional networks at the provincial and district level to encourage women to register as candidates, spreading the word everywhere from mosques to civil society networks.

¶3. (U) To support the IEC's efforts, the Embassy worked with local media outlets to encourage hosting programs that would raise female registration. While at the IEC, Charge d'Affaires Ricciardone spoke to the press about the importance of ensuring female candidates participate in the electoral process. The Embassy funded production of radio public service announcements (PSA) in Dari and Pashto, providing a vehicle for IEC officials and religious leaders to encourage female candidates. The IEC organized funding from The Asia Foundation for additional airtime and ISAF agreed to run the PSAs on its radio network, enabling release to a broader audience than permitted by the initial funding.

CAN'T SELL A BAD PRODUCT

¶4. (SBU) In an April 30 meeting, Lower House MP Qadria Yasdanparast (Kabul, Tajik) asserted security was the biggest obstacle for potential female candidates and expressed the

intent to try to mobilize women through her networks (ref A).

On May 6, Yasdanparast told poloff she had been unable to rouse interest in potential PC candidates. Yasdanparast cited low opinion of PCs as an institution - poor track records, undefined mandates, lack of influence, low salary and lack of a set workplace - as the main disincentives she'd heard.

15. (SBU) PRT officers heard similar opinions. Some incumbents reported feeling that they had accomplished little during their tenure and were unable to fulfill promises to constituents. Other incumbents and potential candidates cited an interest in running in the 2010 parliamentary elections - with a higher profile and more influence - as the reason to stand down from PCs. IEC officials suggested the surfeit of candidates for the 2005 PC elections reflected the lack of information available at that time about how PCs would function. Given PCs' generally poor track records for effectiveness, vague mandate and little influence, potential politicians would rather try for seats in the national parliament.

EVOLVING INFORMATION LEADS TO CONFUSION

16. (SBU) Although the IEC has provided regular updates, ongoing registration has resulted in constantly changing candidate numbers leading some to reach premature conclusions. The IEC's candidate registration system populates the Kabul database from provincial entries, but technical difficulties create inconsistencies. For example, one Provincial Election Office (PEO) sent a stack of

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candidate registration packets to Kabul by air when a computer broke down. Afghan women's groups have suggested security is the biggest concern for women, yet Kandahar and Helmand Provinces have equal or higher percentages of female candidates as Parwan, Bamyan and Kabul. The increased percentage of female candidates also belies claims that the 4,000 Afghani registration fee (about USD 80) or 200 signatures of support created a barrier to participation. IEC officials are not extending candidate registration - a decision which would create problems for candidate vetting and the procurement process. When registration closes on May 8, there will undoubtedly be fewer candidates than there were in 2005, but it should also show greater participation by women.

RICCIARDONE